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ABSTRACT

The reduction of communication "fundamentals" to depoliticized, atheoretical skills in public speaking contradicts recent challenges to rhetoric, such as critical rhetoric, aesthetic rhetoric, and ritual communication. Consequently, teaching in the basic course and university research contradict each other, presenting an image of a confused and inconsistent discipline. A renewed emphasis on communication as ritual provides a central focus that unites research and the teaching of the basic course. The two approaches to teaching basic speech courses are defined as the dominant one, or the outcome paradigm, and the propositional one, or the ritual/process approach. Outcome implies communication as transmission: messages are "sent" by speakers to audience "receivers." Evaluation in the outcome paradigm emphasizes performance and the content of those messages is only indirectly important. Communication as transmission means information processing. Communication as ritual means maintaining and transforming reality. Although the two co-exist, the transmission view dominates. In ritual communication, the symbolic negotiation and struggle over what is reality is constructed, maintained, repaired, and transformed. Viewing the speech event as a part of an ongoing process creates an awareness of the broader context that contains the event. The key difference between the two approaches is the role of the individual in shaping and constructing the material, therefore the reality, as opposed to the discovery of an already constructed reality. Challenges to the basic course are needed to pull together research and teaching so the basic speech course looks more like the discipline that it represents. (CR)

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Some New Directions for the Basic Speech Course

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Centrality in Research and Teaching:
Some New Directions for the Basic Speech Course

The reduction of communication "fundamentals" to de-politicized, atheoretical "skills" in public speaking contradicts recent challenges to rhetoric, such as critical rhetoric, aesthetic rhetoric, and ritual communication. Consequently, teaching in the basic course and research in the University contradict one-another, presenting an image of the communication discipline as confused and inconsistent. As part of the project linking teaching and research, communication scholars should work towards radical restructuring of basic courses that emphasize "speech." Alternative perspectives should be used to challenge the speech paradigm. My purpose in this paper is to problematize the basic course in speech and suggest some ways that it can be transformed by contemporary rhetorical theory. In this presentation, I will focus on some ways that a renewed emphasis on communication as ritual provides a central focus that unites research and the teaching of the basic course.

The first part of my paper is primarily a critique of what I perceive as the dominant paradigm for speech instruction. The criticisms I make in this part of the paper are developed from six years of experience teaching public speaking and other basic communication courses at six different institutions of higher learning. My findings are the result of ongoing critical evaluation of my own and

others' teaching, examination of speech textbooks, participation at speech communication conference panels of public speaking, review of written and oral evaluations provided by students, and coding of personal and focus group interviews conducted with speech students and instructors. In addition, I have kept journals on my observations and thoughts about students and their speeches, as well as my own teaching. Also, I have trained--both formally and informally--a number of teaching assistants who teach the presentational speaking course at Ohio State. My critique of the speech course has been ongoing and informal; thus, I have difficulty saying where structured analysis using contemporary rhetorical theory begins and where unstructured opinion ends. Therefore, I present my ideas as a position paper rather than a research article.

Before presenting my critique, I should make it clear that I intend my comments as a general reading of the state of teaching speech and not as a rigorous analysis. I doubt that a course exists which would exactly fit the characteristics of the monolithic paradigm I will describe as the "outcome" paradigm. However, I <u>do</u> wish to suggest that a given course would probably "tend" toward the paradigm rather than away from it. It follows, then, that the number of competent and excellent speech teachers who succeed within the outcome paradigm do so not <u>because</u> of it but <u>despite</u> it. Thus, much of my critique comes from my own

and others' attempts to solve problems and correct errors in teaching communication, but also from observing successful instructors teaching well.

This critique is inspired by an ongoing frustration related to teaching basic speech courses. As I progressed through two graduate programs and learned more about communication and rhetorical theory, I was able to construct more clearly an analysis of the dominant paradigm for speech education. Thus, my description of this paradigm is influenced by my identification of alternative approaches that appear more efficacious as an introduction to communication. I have come to define the two approaches--the dominant one and the propositional one--as the "outcome paradigm" and the "ritual/process approach," respectively. I will first describe speech education as outcome paradigm, and then offer suggestions for how the ritual approach may be operationalized.

I use the term "outcome" because speeches are treated in this paradigm as the outcome of prior events. In the public speaking class, the focus is on speech as a performance that follows prior work that the speaker has put into it. "Outcome" also implies the model for communication that has become dominant in basic courses--communication as transmission. Communication is conceptualized in physical, mechanical terms--<u>messages</u> are <u>sent</u> by <u>speakers</u> to <u>receivers</u>, who may <u>send</u> <u>feedback</u> to the speaker orally or

visually. Conceiving communication as the transmission of information to audiences emphasizes the physical outcome of the process--the speech event. Although communication as process is an important assumption of this approach, the process is usually punctuated around the speech event. Communication processes such as devising ideas for speeches, writing the speech, and thinking about the speech afterwards are not often included as part of the mechanical process of "speech" communication that gets considered and evaluated in such courses.

Evaluation in the outcome paradigm emphasizes performance, grades being based on a three- or five- or ten-minute presentation to an audience of speech students. Evaluation of speech outcome typically divides the event into a delivery component and an organizational component. Content of messages is relegated to a function of organization and organization is necessary only insofar it constitutes a handy way to measure the "form" of the delivery. Lip-service is paid to speech construction, but delivery dominates in this model; content and message construction figure into the picture mainly in that they contribute to the overall delivery. Thus, delivery subsumes content.

Some other important features of the "speech-as-outcome" approach include:

Speech as "talk" is propietary. What I mean by this is

that students are graded on the performances of messages, but the content of those messages is only indirectly important. Students are responsible for talking, mostly. What they talk about may be wholly unoriginal, bearing no evidence of having been gathered by one student as opposed to another, but this gathering is not important. Communication "skills" need go no further than the mechanical process of interacting--sending and receiving messages.

"General topics" is the primary strategy of invention. Since messages are organized by "topic," the first step in creating a speech is finding an appropriate topic. Appropriateness usually means that a topic is on a serious subject, on an issue already recognized as a social problem or concern. (Magazine articles and encyclopedias are typical sources for finding such topics, as well as a generic stance toward them.) The existence of a topic prior to its discovery in the invention process means that the content is largely beyond the control of the speaker. Writing a speech is mainly a matter of choosing from among available information and rhetoric is reduced to adding stylistic adornment that makes the performance "flow" better.

The virtual context predominates. Speech classes teach students how to give speeches that are appropriate for speech classes. One would presume that basic skills learned

in such classes are applicable in other contexts; however, despite the importance of "rhetorical situations" in communication research, it is the context itself that is usually not problematized. That is, the speech class and its peculiar constraints may be very different from non-speech class contexts in which students will have to speak--for example, motivation for speaking in the outcome paradigm comes from desire to earn a good grade, follow the requirements of the exercise, not to embarass one's self in front of peers, etc. Accomplishing these goals means to respond to the context in which they are provided. Skills developed by students to respond to the speech class context may not carry over into non-speech class applications. Likewise, since in a speech class, so much of the context is a "given"--the student knows the evaluation criteria, knows the audience, knows the room, time-limits, requirements of the audience, etc.--skill in analyzing and responding to, and creating contexts is not learned in the speech class.

I noted earlier that my description of the basic course as an outcome paradigm owes much to alternative ways of conceptualizing communication; in particular, the work of James Carey[1] on communication as ritual has influenced this analysis. James Carey uses the term "ritual communication" to provide a counterpart to the transmission model that

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[1] Carey, J. (1975). A cultural approach to communication. Communication, 2, 1-22.

dominates much thinking on communication. Simply put, communication as transmission emphasizes the mechanistic, physical materiality of communication. Communication as ritual emphasizes the construction of culture through symbolic processes. Communication as transmission means information-processing. Communication as ritual means maintaining and transforming reality. These two views, says Carey, co-exist in the American consciousness (and in other industrialized societies), however, the transmission view--inspired by the idea of communication as transportation of goods and ideas--dominates.

My articulation of the outcome paradigm derives, in part, from viewing its transmission orientation of communication in contrast to the ritual orienation. How does the assumption of communication as ritual transform the basic speech course?

First, communication as process is not limited to the speech event. In Carey's definition of ritual communication, communication is a "symbolic process whereby reality is constructed, maintained, repaired and transformed" (p. 5). The symbolic negotiation and struggle over what constitutes reality is ongoing. The speech event participates in the ongoing process but does not constitute it physically. This alters students' relationship to speech content, inducing them to consider their role in maintaining or challenging a given "reality" or given authoratative

reading of the world.

Reconceptualizing the communication process in this way leads to a variety of positive challenges to the outcome model; primarily, it places a new emphasis on the process by which presentations are devised--thus, the "ritual/process approach" moniker. Instead of an emphasis on "topics" as an invention strategy, the ritual/process approach would encourage students to develop more unique presentations that derive from personal interests and values. For example, I have employed an introductory exercise called the "Personal Coat-of-Arms" in speech classes, which asks students to make a visual representation of things they do well, things they love, etc. As a conclusion, they are asked to create a motto, a personal statement of belief. Later in the course, these statements can be used to stimulate brainstorming exercises that help students come up with presentation ideas. The key difference here between the ritual/process and outcome approaches is that the ritual/process emphasizes the role of the individual in shaping and constructing the material--and therefore the reality--of the speech, through a personal process of "construction" (as opposed to "discovery" of an already constructed reality).

The ritual/process model also circumvents the "virtual context" problem discussed earlier. Viewing the speech event as part of an ongoing symbolic process creates an awareness of the broader context that contains the event.

The speech class itself is part of the context of education, the university, instruction, etc. Speech subject matter represents a particular reading of a "topic" that exists in relation to other views and opinions on a topic. Thus, there is no pure stance that a speaker can or should take on a given subject. Instead, speakers develop a particular "slant" on a given subject in order to share a view with an interested audience. Like the slant of a newspaper article, the slant of a speech is its narrative function, and it should be devised in such a way that it makes the topic relevant to the particular audience to which it is presented.

Evaluation of presentations is also transformed in the ritual model, mainly in that the presentation is not all that is evaluated. The ritual/process model emphasizes the processes by which presentations are developed, borrowing strategies of composition instructors, such as keeping journals and giving presentations to classmates for practice and improvement. In short, in shifting emphasis from the outcome of the speech event, to the process by which the speech event is planned, the ritual/process model encourages students to talk about talking, write about talking, and evaluate themselves and others. It encourages more awareness of the processes that lead up to the speech event. An added benefit of this emphasis is that anxiety may be reduced because the speech event is de-emphasized.

Finally, the actual evaluation of the speech event does not emphasize the outcome of the particular event. Like other aspects of this model, evaluation refers to the ongoing process. Although I have not yet operationalized this aspect of the model, I believe there are new possibilities for evaluation based on the idea of speech competencies. Instead of a conventional grade, students would be evaluated on how they meet certain competencies over a long period of time. So, perhaps by the end of the semester, students should have mastered "using visual aids" or "responding to feedback." The individual speech event, then, becomes one facet of ongoing evaluation of a student's developing skills.

The notion of communication as a ritual, symbolic process is well-represented in some communication research, where it is juxtaposed against transmission views of communication. If this distinction seems like an oversimplification, this is probably because these two strains of thought are well-represented in research, and, as Carey indicates, some of the best writing about communication--particularly that of John Dewey from whom he derives these mutual views--strikes balances between the two.

However, in the basic speech class, the balance is not equal. Mechanistic views of communication dominate and reduce the symbolic, narrative functions of communication to

adornment or to something that should be "inserted" into a speech or added to its content. Such treatment of narrative and symbols contributes to making the basic course decidedly non-rhetorical, and contradicts significant research in the broad field of communication built upon ritual perspective. In this paper, I have outlined one way that the basic course may be critiqued and challenged--but I believe there are other ways that such challenge can be accomplished. And I believe these challenges are needed to pull together research and teaching so that the basic speech course looks more like the discipline that it represents.